



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Confession by Costa-Gavras

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employment and severance policies, staff have felt used and dispensable."

Devotion to a good cause does not excuse an organization from its obligation to provide rational personnel policies, and both the recent uproar and earlier staff grumbling indicate that *the Board should require management to develop explicit procedures and standards in the personnel area*. The staff should also realize that, despite their professional status in many instances, they also play the role of employees, and need some kind of organization through which they can represent their interests to management.

It was characteristic of the process by which such organizations as AFI are formed that Colin Young, who had led the discussions that first mobilized sentiment on behalf of a film institute, and who had more ideas about what such an institute should do than anybody else around, was not invited to sit on the Board of Trustees. When I asked Stevens why, among all the people who had done scholarly, critical, or university-level film teaching in this country, only Arthur Knight (who has excellent high-level industry connections) was on the Board, Stevens allowed that he just couldn't understand how such an oversight had occurred. Knight has of course been an extremely valuable member of the Board; but the persistent exclusion of all others who have done serious intellectual work in the American film world is perhaps the major "symbolic" reason why AFI so lacks friends among those people who loved film before it came to the attention of the big foundations; and it goes far to explain certain biases of AFI operations. *The Board should include several additional members who have done original and important thinking about film as an art (historians, teachers,*

critics) and can help redress the balance that has tipped so far in the direction of production. This indeed seems to me the most crucial recommendation that can be made; without such a move, support for AFI will continue to erode almost everywhere outside the walls of Greystone.

As far as I can tell, very few people in the film world want the American Film Institute to die. Too many high hopes have been attached to it for anyone to write it off easily; and it has accomplished its tasks of archive and film-maker support with distinction. Its potential for helping to develop a national film culture is large. However, many people are troubled by what seems to them an imbalance in AFI priorities, and by the signs of internal personnel difficulties. What is needed, therefore, if AFI is to successfully regroup after its present financial crisis and go forward into a second phase of existence, is a wholesale reexamination and reordering of AFI priorities. If a new consensus can be achieved on what AFI ought to be doing, this could serve as the basis for a genuine constituency that could help AFI survive in the long run—both through direct membership support and through political pressure aimed at fuller government support, which is the source of money for all other film institutes in the world. (The BFI gets some \$1,800,000 yearly, and BFI income from publications, admissions, etc. is almost as great; the BFI, however, also operates the national archive, which here is a responsibility of the Library of Congress.) If the Center can be spun off and AFI policies turned around, AFI will only have begun to fight on behalf of the art. If that cannot be accomplished, the struggle is already over, and we can begin preparing inscriptions to be engraved somewhere at Greystone.

Reviews

THE CONFESSION

Director: Costa-Gavras. Script: Jorge Semprun, based on the book by Lise and Artur London. Photography: Raoul Coutard.

Melodrama is usually a grossly inadequate form for treating political subjects. It renders historical experience subjectively; it makes a few individual consciousnesses the sole perceivers

and final judges of events. Social circumstances which a single consciousness could barely encompass generally escape melodrama's scope; so that historical movements, the detailing of which is indispensable to a full understanding of history and of personal experience, are dealt with scantily if at all.

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What melodrama retains are the self-concerns of single minds; the structure of the narrative follows from this. The opening suspense sequences of *The Confession* are good examples of melodramatic structuring of political material. Director Costa-Gavras uses the film frame to isolate the hero from his surroundings, then to bring the secret police pursuing him into prominence. When the hero goes to visit his old comrades from the International Brigade and warn them, the camera goes for one man's face, then another. The frame isolates objects, faces, and figures of direct personal concern to the hero. It stresses those things which threaten him, which affect him sentimentally (a photo from the Spanish Civil War, a boy running through a park), which relate to him as an individual perceiving consciousness. The frame emphasizes these personal percepts by excluding all physical context, except that which relates them directly to their perceiver—the rear-view mirror of a car, a window-frame. *The Confession* adopts the dominant trend of melodrama by centering on a privileged consciousness—a hero whose high social position makes him more sensitive, more detached from his surroundings, more articulate therefore about his experience, and generally a better subject for a dramatic mode which has to describe social situations *through* the mind of its protagonist.

The body of the film follows the breaking of a Czech government official and Communist Party member in 1952. Acting on Stalin's paranoia, the Czech secret police and their Soviet Advisers force Artur London (Yves Montand) into confessing a treason he never committed. As the day-by-day narrative proceeds, it describes more and more events from the hero's perspective; when he's blindfolded and taken to prison the camera goes in tight on his head and refuses to show the passing streets he cannot see; when he is locked in his cell, the camera invariably stays with him, never showing him from a guard's perspective. He is present at every moment of the film, and no event is shown which he does not experience.



THE CONFESSION

Up to halfway through, the film describes a haywire police machine from the point of view of an individual caught within it. Then the script-writer, Jorge Semprun (also the scenarist of *La Guerre est finie*), cuts to the year 1968, finding the hero seated on a terrace over the Riviera, slightly aged but otherwise undamaged, talking with a bourgeois intellectual and a member of the French CP (an organization Daniel Cohn-Bendit aptly termed "a bunch of Stalinist creeps.") The function of this flash-forward is to take the audience's concern away from the melodramatic question, will the hero survive his torture, and place its concern more firmly on the film's central subject: the hero's relation to his party. Stalin overshadows the Czech CP; his anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and general anticommunist paranoia has made the Party's centralism undemocratic. Yet the hero remains loyal to the idea of a communist party through the grueling spectacle of historical truth being replaced with the lies most comfortable for Stalin's insanity.

Beyond this, the flash-forward gives Semprun the means to include some awkward historical commentary, and this at a point where the movie could have turned to pure melodrama, dealing only with the plight of this individual. London on the Riviera talks about the historical circumstances of his trial and later rehabilitation; he makes somewhat clearer the relationship between Stalin, the Russian CP,

the Czech Party, and his own situation. Both the functions of this flash-forward are laudably antimelodramatic; they move away from an exclusively private rendering of experience and toward a dealing with the relations between persons and social forces, relations which shape social history.

Even Semprun's treatment of memory, a topic central to the most subjective fiction, helps describe the social relationships and objective historical experience behind London's true story. In the middle of interrogations, London begins to remember images from the Spanish Civil War, from Party conferences, from talks with other Party friends. These clipped scenes begin to build a structure: the structure of the hero's relations to his Party. Unfortunately there is very little memory-material and the structure is sparsely elaborated, leaving the hero's final statements of allegiance to the central Party rather surprising.

Here we arrive at a flaw in the film, at least for American audiences unfamiliar with European history and socialism. *The Confession* attacks Stalinism: excellent. In this attack it avoids anticommunism by letting the hero state truly communist ideals and act like an ideal communist: better yet. But it shows only sentimental reasons—a few photographs, a few friendships—for his adherence to communism. In the absence of more concrete social reasons for his beliefs, the film becomes a spectacle: the spectacle of Stalinists torturing an upright man to the point where he tells lies in public. Audiences "informed" by the bourgeois press will fit this spectacle into an anticommunist world-view, missing the point that the hero they admire makes the film not anticommunist but anti-Stalinist and, indeed, procommunist.

Which is an aspect of the film's larger problem: the relation of London's historical experience to the historical situation and the audience-consciousness of the present time. Stalin is long dead, yet Stalin's Russian imperialism continues to shackle progressive socialism in Eastern Europe; the film, in the rare instances when it assigns specific blame, places it on

Stalin, which does not help us understand the contemporary Stalinism with which the film ends. At the end the hero returns to Prague to get his story published; the same day he arrives, the Russians invade and replace Czechoslovakia's progressive government with a Moscow-ruled one. The film cuts freeze-frames of London against documentary footage of Czechs attacking Russian tanks and rioting in the streets. Rather than situating London within the riots, this cutting gives him the detachment of a viewer. What is his relationship to the anti-Stalinist demonstrations? What is the relationship of his personal story and his Party allegiance to the political events of now? What are progressives supposed to do with this anti-Stalin lesson?—MIKE PROKOSCH.

GIMME SHELTER

Directed by David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin. Cinema V.

The short history of rock 'n' roll festivals is circumscribed by three singular events: the Monterey Festival, the Lake Bethel Festival, and a day-long concert at the Altamont Speedway. Each event's claim to singularity is by this time a matter of commonly received opinion: as our commentators have it, Monterey marked the apotheosis of the San Francisco-based flower culture, the Bethel concert (Woodstock) was the great coming together for, in its advertisement's words, three days of Love, Peace and Music, and Altamont the death of flower-power, the death of Love, the death of Rock, depending on whom you read. How each of these affairs became elevated to the status of a major event, dwarfing even Newport in its heyday, is a question of some interest, especially since both the monied press and the so-called underground press (that press, you will remember, which grew up in opposition to the established press) subscribe to and share an interest in essentially the same apprehension of all three experiences. The difference between the *Life* magazine extra on Woodstock and